

VDC Interview Transcript
 Susan Hadley.2, OSU Dance Chair
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OSUDance
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Key:

CF: Candace Feck
 SH: Susan Hadley

CF: Thanks for meeting again to help us address the sound problems we had with the first interview. I wonder if you could begin by retelling the wonderful story of Merce Cunningham's advice to Helen— and how we got to that was your talking about how Helen dealt with coming from PE to Sullivant Hall.

SH: Well, when Helen came back to OSU in 1946, I think she already knew Merce from her New York years, and she was trying very hard during the late 40's, early 50s to not just teach dance classes in Women's Physical Education, but to establish a dance program, and she convinced — you can imagine that she convinced the powers that be that they should have a dance program within Women's Physical Education, and they said "Yes." And then Helen thought, and said to Merce, "How do I do that, actually?" So here she had been an advocate for this, but now here it was in front of her — and Merce said "You just begin." And in fact those are the words at Helen's gravesite, on her stone. Of course that is the Cunningham choreographic ethos. But it's an administrative ethos as well, and a leadership approach.

CF: Great. You also characterized the Helen Alkire you encountered when you came to grad school and what you got to in that was Helen as a big picture person, but you talked about the Helen you met when you came here...

SH: When I was in graduate school in '79 through '81, this was at the end of Helen's time as the first Chair of the program; she retired in '83. So, she had it down. And she led a graduate seminar about, I think, a lot of things, but my take-away from it was the "big picture" — the big picture for advocacy for dance, for the arts, in these huge universities. And I think that what Helen was as a teacher was the *embodiment* of something. So it was as much for me about who she was and who she had been, and her experiences as it was her telling us *anything*, listing the five points of excellent leadership...We watched her. We watched her speak, we heard how she framed the big essential questions that faced her in the university.

CF: You also spoke about her generation of women leaders, about her widespread national influence, especially through the founding of NASD and CODA — if you would mind recapitulating that.

SH: These women who started the first dance programs, the women of Helen's generation: Margaret Erlanger, Elizabeth Hayes, Alma Hawkins — these women. They were a team. They were lone wolves at their universities, they were sort of solo pioneer women at their universities. But they met

regularly and I think it was that support — they were supporting each other, trying to do similar things — for most of them, in these big Research One institutions. And this group of women, I believe, started to get together, even in the 50s, the late 50s. They formed the Council of Dance Administrators, CODA, which still exists today — with 25 schools. And CODA then realized that Theatre, Design and Music had for many decades had the National Association of Theatre, NAST, NASM for Music, which were federal accrediting bodies. And if they were, in fact, going to be advocating for the legitimacy of Dance on the university campus, they needed to have federal accreditation — and so they began that long process of forming the National Association of Schools of Dance [NASD] in the late 70s.

CF: Along those lines, we were also talking about how Helen's vision for a department really departed from H'Doubler's, in certain specific ways that were important. And you spoke about the bringing of visiting artists, the determination to stay connected to the professional field — and you also talked about her vision for the breadth of education she wanted. So, I wonder if you could revisit that discussion about her *very* particular vision, which was distinct from what was existing in other schools...

SH: Yeah. Margaret H'Doubler was a generation ahead of Helen, and her strategy for getting dance curriculum into the university was to go through Women's Physical Education — and more specifically, through teacher training and teacher education. So, coming out of the dress reform movement, of really the late Victorian era, Margaret H'Doubler worked in Women's Physical Education to train teachers to include dance in the Physical Education curriculum. This was her strategy, and it worked beautifully at the University of Wisconsin. But Helen had been a professional dancer with Hanya Holm in New York, and she was determined to create artists, to train people at the university to enter the profession as professional dancers, designers, art-makers and choreographers. So this was a departure from H'Doubler — even though it began in Women's Physical Education for 22 years here at Ohio State. It eventually became its own department as distinct from Physical Education and as distinct from Theatre, which is still where Dance is housed, in a majority, really, of our universities today. Helen's other visionary idea, which continues to really inform our decisions in the department, is that she wanted a breadth of training for her dancers for a lifetime career in dance: Yes, performing — but also creative art-making, design, history, production and analysis. And again, we are one of the broadest programs, perhaps *the* broadest BFA program in the country, because of that vision.

CF: I do think you might want to restate your belief that one of the ways she did that was by bringing visiting artists, and how the department, to this day, whenever it revisits its mission, again embraces her broad vision. So those are two things that might be important to reassert — one, her bringing in of artists to this day as a way of training artists, and the other, just how the faculty has re-embraced this vision.

SH: Yep. We invited Helen to visit a faculty retreat in which, once again, we were looking at our mission, our purpose — and she came and pulled out a piece of paper, as I recall, that had the five guiding principles of her department — and we marveled at the fact that they continue to inform our decisions today in the program. So, a number of them revolved around training professionals for the field, but training them broadly for the field. And what we now refer to as “existing at the intersection of physical practice, creative activity and theoretical inquiry.” The students who thrive in our program are thriving because they have chosen both the scholarly and the creative approach to research; they appreciate the physical practice as well as the academic challenge in the program. This

is *directly* from Helen Alkire. Another pillar for her was that we needed to stay intimately connected to the professional field, and so as soon as the early '50s, Helen brought professionals from the field to her program — to either restage work, to create new work, to teach. And that currency, staying at the heart of what is currently happening in the contemporary dance field, lies at the heart, really, of the success of our program — and also supports connections between undergrads and grads in the professional field upon graduation.

CF: I had asked you a question about Helen, especially in the early days, as entering a man's world of university administrators in the university. And you had responded about a department of women, a department that's about the body — two strikes against her from the start — and you also sort of segued into her savvy use of notation.

SH: Right, right. So here was Helen in the late '40s, walking into a predominately male, predominately white world at the university. Now, Helen had two older brothers; she was the youngest. And she grew up in a farming community. I think her mother, and I think the women in her family, were strong. And she was not held back in any way by her parents. When Helen showed a very early interest in dance — like at age seven and eight — her mother found Stella Becker, who was a renowned modern dance teacher at the time, for Helen to study dance. So, her interest in dance, a feminine pursuit as it were, was taken seriously by her parents. She went to college in the '30s. Her power was nurtured as a young woman by her parents, and that carried through, of course, to her....I don't know if she ever doubted or questioned that she couldn't do what she wanted to do. And we also know that modern dance was a field populated by our early pioneers, who were women. So from her personal life, her family life, and her professional life, she had the example of women speaking loudly from their own experience, with their own voices. She navigated power with aplomb. She was political in the best sense of that word: she knew who to talk to, she knew who to have drinks with at the Faculty Club. And she got what she wanted by making connections across this university to the powerful people. I think she was extremely wise to understand that dance had a couple of strikes against it. Its subject matter was the body; the body has not been the most important way of learning or source of knowledge in the university — those sources of knowledge have been linguistic, scientific. And secondly, dance was predominately a female field. So here her discipline had some strikes against it, even compared to other arts disciplines. But we did and do have a system of writing in our field, called Labanotation — and she had made very good connections with Lucy Venable, who was early on a notator and interested in Labanotation. And I think Helen believed in notation. But she also understood that it was a bargaining chip for her in terms of describing to people who were in language-based disciplines that we could write our field. We could write it, we could record it, and we had a way of recording its history. That was a language, as it were, that was spoken by academics and I think she wielded that argument when the department was first formed in '68, to also have it be the site of the Dance Notation Bureau Extension, which was in charge of the educational wing of the Dance Notation Bureau.

CF: Great. I thought that some of the most powerful material from your earlier interview was your discussion of the importance of being located in a state university: what that means for our students, for the students of Ohio, and actually you sort of segued from that into speaking about the value of arts training, no matter what our students do — that the skills they are learning are transferable to so many disciplines.

SH: The arts in general, and the contemporary arts specifically, are considered by most people to be elitist. So therefore one could imagine that it would be the expensive private schools that would

house arts study. It's interesting to me, however, that Helen and a number of her peers were establishing these programs in Research One, often land-grant state universities. And I believe that's critical, because there's a certain populist ethos, as it were, or mentality in that, that within the state of Ohio, students can afford the kind of art training that this program provides. Not just Juilliard, not just the expensive conservatories. And I have to say that Helen grew up in Orient, Ohio, on her grandfather's farm for the first seven years and that she, I believe, made a lot of decisions out of a Midwestern, populist, democratic — not Democratic Party — democratic country value system, and in fact, many, many New York dance professionals actually grew up in Ohio because they had this program at Ohio State University in the 50s, 60s, 70s and beyond. They had access to this kind of training.

CF: Yes. You also spoke about the fact that one of the strengths of the department is that it's not a cookie-cutter department, and that there are these various avenues that prepare our students to make contributions in any number of professional capacities. Could you address that again?

SH: A number of BFA departments in the country — and excellent ones — have a sheet of paper with boxes on it called "The BFA in Dance." And once you have checked off all the boxes, you have your BFA in Dance, and everyone from that program has the same BFA. Here at Ohio State, for the first two years, you take "the boxes" — what we tell you to do; the second two years, you tell *us* what you are doing. So, no one here is graduating with the same BFA. Someone who is interested in Dance and Technology, or Mediated Performance might organize their last two years to take Dance Film I and II, Intermedia, and make a senior project that involves film and live performance. Someone involved in Education might take a series of three courses and then apprentice with a Dance Specialist in the public schools and then do a senior project in a community center with a senior population. And I could go on and on with our program that is designed for students before they graduate to take control of decisions about who they want to be — not just as artists but as people on the world stage, and as the crafters of their own careers and their own decisions.

CF: We have five minutes, and I have two more points. We had been talking about how the department has responded to change over time, and you led from that discussion into the evolution of our other degrees and to technology. And then I will have one further question.

SH: There are a lot of generational legacies that come from Helen, and one is that a dancer who had graduated in Greek and Latin from Bryn Mawr, Senta Driver, found the OSU graduate program in Dance in the late '60s — and was a devoted student and then friend and supporter of Helen Alkire. Senta Driver went on to dance with Paul Taylor and then form her own company, and then when I graduated from OSU, my first company that I danced with was Senta's company, *Harry*. Senta said that Helen had no sooner put a new curriculum in place than she began to question it: "What's wrong with it? How should it change? Is it effective?" And when I heard that from Senta, I thought, "We're still doing this! We relentlessly look at what we're doing — maybe don't even give it enough time — before we think we have a better way. I think this is the spirit of a contemporary artist, however, as well. Right. We are not resting on the accomplishments of the past. So, Helen had her department started in 1968, then she hires Louise Guthman in the early 70s to begin a production area. She then hires Angelika Gerbes in the mid-seventies as the first dance historian, she hires Vera Maletic to begin and to really grow the Laban Studies area, then we have an MA but Vickie Blaine begins an MFA in the 80s... Vickie Blaine heard about this thing called Technology, and she has admitted more than once, "I didn't really know what that was, but I knew it was a thing." And so she hired Scott Sutherland, an undergraduate student, saying "Scott, I think we're supposed to be

doing Technology.” This is the early 90s! “We should be doing Technology. Help me figure out what that is.” This is the spirit that continues to live on in our programs, and so then in the early 2000s we began to really understand that Ohio State Department of Dance should house a doctoral program – and you, Candace Feck, Karen Eliot and a number of people began to work, and we offered it in 2007 — we’re now only one of four programs in the nation offering a PhD in Dance.

CF: Finally, perhaps you could address the new building and our position as the first of the Arts District.

SH: Someday — sooner, I hope, rather than later, it is planned that 15th and High will be the official gateway to the Ohio State University, and plans were just unveiled a few months ago for this whole part of campus to be called the OSU Arts District. There is one building completed in the Arts District, and that is our building, Sullivant Hall. So, former Chair Susan Petry was presiding as Chair during all of the architectural planning, moving out of Sullivant, staying away for two and a half years, coming back in to this remarkable facility with our own blackbox theatre, increased classroom and studio space, the moving of the Advanced Computing Center for the Arts and Design, ACCAD, across the hall with a Motion Capture Lab — state-of-the-art facilities. This is the beginning of what will be [the School of] Music having new facilities, a renovation of Mershon, Theatre will come back from Drake Union, and all of the arts will be here together. There’s quite a commitment from our higher administration to make the OSU Arts District an exemplary complex on the university campus.

CF: Fabulous. Thank you.